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LIFESTYLE

How capital and communication shape collective consciousness

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The idea of the public sphere, or "Öffentlichkeit," has long fascinated those interested in how society works. Rather than thinking of it as just a spot where people hash things out, it often makes more sense to view it as a backdrop—an open space where different social experiences unfold. There isn't just one public sphere, and treating it as a single, uniform idea would miss its true complexity. On closer inspection, it's much more a mix or gathering of countless elements. Each piece brings its own history, features, and influence.

If we want to really understand public life, we must look beneath its surface. This involves questioning how the dominant middle-class version of the public sphere—the bourgeois model—operates. Just as important is the need to imagine alternatives, especially those bound up with workers' movements and the so-called proletarian sphere.

Who is left out? How the bourgeois public sphere works

For many years, the mainstream version of the public sphere grew alongside capitalist society. It defined itself in opposition to other domains: government offices, busy marketplaces, and the private side of home and family.

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In theory, it offered a stage for any individual to step forward and debate the big issues of the day on equal terms. Yet from the beginning, this promise always had its flaws. The supposed openness of such spaces concealed deep contradictions, often preventing true equality and leaving many voices on the outside.

The BPS is built upon an "abstract principle of generality," which, in practice, operates as a mechanism of exclusion. This abstract ideal, which brackets off social status and special interests, is deemed no less violent than the universalizing tendency of the liberal-capitalist market it seeks to transcend. Historically, this abstract generalization sanctioned the exclusion of substantial social groups, including workers, women, servants, and vital social issues such as sexuality and childrearing, which constitute the "material conditions of production and reproduction".

The weakness inherent in the BPS stems precisely from this contradiction: it excludes substantial life interests while simultaneously claiming to represent the totality of society. Because it is insufficiently grounded in "substantive life interests," the BPS is compelled to ally itself with the powerful, tangible interests of capitalist production. This framework forces the experiences and

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interests of the working class into the BPS not as collective modes of production for new forms of public consciousness, but merely as a gigantic, cumulative "private interest". The BPS thus becomes an illusion, yet one with a material core rooted in the "contradictory relation between a totally socialized context" and the private forms of appropriation.

The rise of industrialized public spheres of production

The traditional BPS is now overlaid by industrialized public spheres of production. These new forms are a "direct expression of the sphere of production" and are fundamentally different from the quasi-artisanal, classical BPS. They depend on modern technology, such as computers, mass media, and media cartels, operating at a "superior and more highly organized level of production".

The most prominent example of this transformation is the consciousness industry. Unlike the classical BPS, which aimed at legitimacy, the public spheres of production operate by blurring the lines between public and private. They voraciously absorb the consumer's "context of living" (Lebenszusammenhang) as their raw material,

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commodifying and desubstantiating it. This process shifts the political opposition from the traditional "public" versus "private" dichotomy to a contradiction between production interests and the need for legitimation.

The totalizing public sphere of production, particularly through media cartels, aims to provide not merely individual satisfaction, but "whole cycles" of satisfaction in the form of a context of living. This accumulation and organization of commodities transforms them into fantasy values by linking them to broad imaginary life desires and the libidinal economy of the individual. This industrialized production of illusion is so effective that it becomes the "most advanced site of struggle over the organization of everyday experience".

The counter-concept – the proletarian public sphere

Against the fragmenting and exclusionary logic of the bourgeois and industrialized public spheres, Negt and Kluge develop the concept of the proletarian public sphere. This is conceived as a "historical counterconcept" to the BPS, representing a fundamentally different "conceptualization of the overall social context" rooted in the production process.

The proletarian public sphere arises from the systematic blockage of social experience within the working-class context of living. It is a "social, collective process of production that has as its object the human senses in their interrelatedness". It is not merely a variant of the plebeian public sphere, but the "essential core of a conception of public sphere that is rooted in the production process".

The possibility of a transformative proletarian public sphere hinges upon several critical factors

Organization of experience: The public sphere possesses use-value when "social experience organizes itself within it". For the working class, this involves constructing a collective horizon that uncouples their investigative concepts from the abstract compartmentalizations of the BPS. The goal is to organize experience for the purpose of emancipation.

Relationality (*Zusammenhang*): The organizing principle of resistance is the possibility of making connections between typically segregated domains, such as public and private, reality and fantasy, production and desire, and diverse partial publics. This relationality

counters the simulated coherence of the dominant public sphere.

The workings of fantasy: The fantasy production of the masses is a "subliminal activity of consciousness" that, because it has been neglected by bourgeois interests, represents a "partly autonomous, proletarian mode of experience". A proletarian public sphere must work through this fantasy production, incorporating promises of meaning and totality—which reproduce uncensored actual wishes—into the autonomous forms of action of the workers.

Historical consciousness and memory: The proletarian public sphere is in sharp contrast to the BPS, which has consistently excluded history. It requires "fully developed historical awareness", transforming the dialectic between living and dead labor, between present and past generations, into social forms of expression that can be understood by everyone. This collective memory is essential for any counterhegemonic politics.

The formation of counterpublics must emerge from the "hybrid, impure forms" created by the seams, fissures, and overlaps between different types of publicity. This approach mandates a focus on the dynamics of existing

public spheres—their unstable makeup and the complex imbrication of global and local parameters—to discover the "gaps and overlaps that can be used for agency, solidarity, and the fashioning of a common future". The ultimate project is the autonomous, collective organization of the experience specific to workers, fostering a medium of communication that addresses the whole of society, rather than being confined by the technical or political abstractions of the ruling class.

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